THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
Life Ahead!

John M. Buchanan
Easter
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"The resurrection declares that the cross was a victory, not a defeat. The deepest meanings of the resurrection have to do with new creation, God's new world brought to birth. When Jesus emerged, transformed, from the tomb on Easter morning it was the first day of God's new week, the moment of sunrise after the long night.... The resurrection of Jesus means that the present time is shot through with great significance. What is done for the glory of God in the present is genuinely building for God's future. Acts of justice and mercy, the creation of beauty and the celebration of truth, deeds of love and creation of communities of kindness and forgiveness – these all matter, and they matter forever.

N. T. Wright
The Meaning of Jesus

FOURTH
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CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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colored the day before—that struck me as slightly bizarre. The chocolate part was a good idea, I always thought.

What I liked best about the whole peculiar routine were those large eggs made of hardened sugar, decorated elaborately, with one end open so you could look in—and inside the egg was a magical miniature world; tiny trees and houses, children playing, sometimes a rabbit. I was always fascinated by that alternate world which I now understand is not a bad metaphor for the message of Easter; an invitation to live in a new world, in which a resurrection has happened. That is an idea so big, so earth-shattering, the most eloquent can only stutter about it, or stand in reverent silence—which is exactly how this first story of the first Easter tells it.

Jesus, an itinerate rabbi from Galilee had come to Jerusalem for Passover and five days after his arrival had been arrested, tried in a hurried kangaroo court arranged by the religious and political authorities, convicted, sentenced, executed and buried – all very efficiently. Why? The charge against him was sedition. In Galilee he had quite a following. His friends and disciples were even saying that he was the Messiah, the promised King of Israel. Obviously it's one thing to say that in a small rural village and another thing altogether to say it on the streets of the capital city in the middle of a patriotic holiday. So the authorities - even though the Roman Governor Pontius Pilate doesn't seem to have his heart in it, and even though the common people seem to like him, the authorities do what they have to do to preserve order, arrange to have him executed, publicly, as Rome always did, by the extraordinarily cruel method of crucifixion.

As expected the crowd that welcomed him on Sunday turned on him and with a little encouragement demanded his death. His friends, as expected, abandoned him fearing for their own lives. So he died alone – except for the women, the only ones to stay with him. The Romans made sure he was dead before sundown on Friday when the Jewish Sabbath began and then turned his body over to a local – who buried him in his own garden.

Saturday is the Sabbath, a quiet day. And then at dawn, on the first day of the week, three of the women who were there as he died, showed up at the tomb. They wanted to pay final respects, anoint the body with oils and spices. They were focused on the task at hand. Their concern was pragmatic. There was a large stone covering the tomb and they weren't sure they could move it.

What they found when they arrived was disconcerting to say the least. The stone was already rolled away. It would have been very disturbing, but what happened next was terrifying. Fearing the worst – that someone had stolen the body, they peered in and were startled to encounter – not a dead body but a young man who said, of all things, "Do not be alarmed – he isn't here – he has been raised – go tell Peter and his disciples that he is going ahead of you to Galilee."

And this lean, spare account concludes: "So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

If you are a reader of footnotes you will notice at the bottom of page 55 in the New Testament – that the oldest copies of the manuscript end right there – and that the next eleven verses which provide a much more emotionally satisfying conclusion, were added later, by copyists!

And so some scholars speculate that a piece of the original scroll must have broken off and that Mark actually did write a more proper conclusion. And others suggest that because he was writing during a time of official persecution the soldiers came for him, burst into his study and carried him off mid-sentence. And some suggest that Mark ends his account intentionally this way precisely in order to convey the message that this is not the end of the story but the beginning; almost as if Mark anticipated the fact that the resurrection, by itself, is so extraordinary, exceptional, so stretches credibility that readers ever thereafter would stop at the empty tomb, spend enormous amounts of energy debating about what happened, speculating about different theories. It's almost as if Mark anticipates all the scientific controversy generated by the proposal that a dead man came back to life—shrouds and carbon dating and theories about post-death resuscitation occurrences; almost as if this ancient writer anticipates the way culture will take this event and because it doesn't know what to do with it, to make it consumer friendly, mix it all up with pagan fertility symbols, eggs and quick breeding rabbits, and emerging life in the newly fertile earth and flowers – and come up with a lovely, if bizarre, festival of spring. It's almost as if Mark knows where the human race will go with this and so says – it's not about bunnies and chickens and eggs and candy – as lovely as they are. It's about the reality of death and then a greater reality – the power of the love of God that brings life out of death. It's not about an empty tomb – which, appropriately sends the only ones brave enough to peer in, scurrying in terror. It's about love and life. He is not here – he is going ahead of you to Galilee. It's about the future.

I love the way Mark ends his account precisely because it is not neat, doesn't try to explain what happened, makes no claims – just announces that he isn't in a tomb where everyone expects to find him, but is already out ahead of them and that they will see him again, in the future.

It's to Galilee that he's going. That's home for them. That's where they live, have families, work and play. Galilee is daily routine. That's where the risen Lord promises to meet them. What an intriguing suggestion – that the risen Christ comes to us, not in places we expect him, structures we have made for him – religious tradition and rites, liturgies, creeds – churches even. He promises to be where we live and work and play. He promises to bring hope and life and rebirth and love and new possibilities into our lives at their most human and most ordinary.

Most of us, I think, accommodate too easily to the status quo. Most of us give up and give in too quickly to huge forces which seem to be in control of our lives. When things are not going well professionally, or relationally, or spiritually, or sometimes physically, we are inclined simply to submit to realities that are deadly. But he promises to meet us in Galilee – in our ordinary lives. He promises to bring the power of love and creativity and new possibility into our life situation whatever it is.

Distinguished scholar Walter Brueggemann, perhaps the best teacher around these days says – Easter is "not only truth disclosed, but it is life disclosed. Because of Easter," Brueggeman says, "I can come out from behind my desk, my stethoscope, my uniform, my competence, my credentials, my fears – to meet life a little more boldly."

That's what Easter is about – stepping out from whatever we are hiding behind and meeting life more boldly, more hopefully, more confidently.

The future is where Christ promises to meet us. And yet, if we are honest, the future is always at least a mixed prospect. Somewhere out there trouble looms, big trouble. Somewhere out there are losses, diminishment, mortality, endings.

- "Death," the distinguished Catholic theologian Karl Rahner said, "is the absurd arch-contradiction of existence."
- "I do not approve" Dorothy Parker said.
- "Do not go gently," Dylan Thomas said.
- "Life's a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more." William Shakespeare said.
- "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity."
- "There is nothing new under the sun," the writer of Ecclesiastes says.
- "I don't want to achieve immortality through my art. I want to achieve it by not dying." Woody Allen says.
- "Of course, everybody has to die," William Saroyan said, "but I thought an exception would be made in my case."

Have you noticed? People you love die. The great Requiem Masses – Mozart, Faure, Durufle—become more and more personal and poignant as the years go by.

"Grant them rest eternal and light perpetual shine on them forever" evoke tears because there are a lot of them now.

When his mother died the late Henri Nouwen wrote to his father asking how the "Easter story speaks to you now that you know so well what it means to lose the one you loved most." (*A Letter of Consolation*, p. 90).

Nouwen is not trivial with his father's grief. It is not appropriate to say that "everything will be all right." Everything is not all right. Not at all. To trivialize death is to trivialize life.

So what he did was remind his father of the story of Easter: reminded him that no one expected anything other than death, no one expected anything but death to have the last word. (Ibid p. 90)

And then, not long before his own untimely death, Nouwen wrote:

> "The resurrection is God's way of revealing to us that nothing that belongs to God will ever go to waste. What belongs to God will never get lost.... The resurrection doesn't answer any of our common questions about life after death such as 'How will it be? How will it look?' But it does reveal to us that love is stronger than

> death. God's love for us, our love for each other, and our love for those who lived before and who will live after us is not just a quickly passing experience, but a reality transcending all time and space." (*Our Greatest Gift, A Meditation on Dying and Caring,* p.109)"

I love the story Nouwen shares with his readers about The Flying Rodleighs, German trapeze artists he greatly admired – so much so that he befriended them, attended practice, even traveled with them. "What's it like?" He asked once and the leader, the flyer said, "I must have complete trust in my catcher. The public might think I'm the star – but the real star is Joe, my catcher. How does that work?" Nouwen asked. "The secret,"Rodleigh said, "is that the flyer does nothing and the catcher does everything...You do nothing?" Rodleigh responded, "The worst thing the flyer can do is try to catch the catcher ... the flyer must trust, with outstretched arms, that the catcher will be there for him."

Nouwen reflects: "the words of Jesus flashed through my mind. 'Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.' Dying is trusting in the catcher. Don't be afraid. Remember that you are the beloved child of God. He will be there when you make your long jump. Don't try to grab him; he will grab you. Just stretch out your arms and trust, trust, trust." (p. 66-67)

"He is going ahead of you – there – Galilee – your life – your future – even your death – you will see him, just as he told you."

The preacher worries about this one. So many people. So much expectation. So much at stake. The one word that must be said – He is risen, cannot be explained, rationalized, only confessed, sung, prayed, affirmed best by poet, musician, artist. And so we commiserate with one another and comb the old texts for a new angle, and the magazines and essays and journals for a new way to say it. In one of them that we read "*Journal for Preachers*" the lead essay this year was by Walter Brueggemann. About this exercise in which you and I are engaged this morning, he wrote:

> "Happily Easter is not generated by the preacher. It rather is the signature – miracle of the Creator – the one who brings light out of the darkness. The miracle of Easter does not come from the preacher: it comes to the preacher who need only tell the truth of new life that comes precisely in our darkness."

And so it did as it always does. In life and work it happens, quietly, unmistakably; in some unexpected gesture of heroism or caring or love or hope; some clear sign that life and love have the last word, not death.

There was a memorial service here on Wednesday morning. One of our own, a faithful and generous member of this congregation died at the age of 97. She charmed all of us when we visited her with her grace and humor and integrity. She lived her life with exuberance and confidence and didn't seem to fear anything. She had planned her memorial service, planned a celebration lunch that followed, even planned the menu. On my first visit with her she was showing me her art collection which was quite extensive, telling which paintings she loved most and why. I commented on one – a lovely impressionist seascape, noting that the tiny bright red sail on the boat in the ocean brought focus and punctuation to the picture. "I did that" she said. I was impressed. "You

painted that picture?" I asked. "No," she said, "just the sail. I thought it was drab, needed a little color, so one day I painted the sail red."

That's when Easter came for me – preparing a funeral for a dear friend – thinking about the miracle of God's love and how in the middle of the dreariness and deadliness of Good Friday – God creates bright, new life; thinking about the ancient promise that God will swallow up death and wipe tears from all eyes; thinking about love stronger than death; thinking about those simple deceptive Easter words. "He's going ahead of you – there you will see him."

You do not need to be afraid. The future will contain limits and diminishment and loss. But it will also contain a love that is stronger than death.

Jesus Christ is Risen. Thanks be to God.
Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER
The Reverend John Wilkinson
Easter
APRIL 23, 2000

How could we sing resurrection this day, eternal God? How could we sing it and pray it and act it? How could we live for the promise of the empty tomb? How could we gather with the women on that first morning, with the terrified disciples? How could we gather with the church over decades and centuries and millennia? For that is what you have called us to do, sing resurrection. We have waited and watched and lived through the darkness of the night. And now morning comes, the stone is rolled away, the tomb is empty. And though with words never adequate, we would sing and pray and gather together in this resurrection community, with Christians around the world, sharing, simply, the good news that Christ is risen.

And as we share that good news this day, gracious God, we would be mindful of corners of the world where resurrection's whisper is faint. We know fighting and civil unrest circle the globe, and so this day we would lift up prayers for peace and claim our calling to be peacemakers. We know there is famine, unimaginable famine, and so this day, we would lift up prayers for those who are hungry, particularly young bellies without food, and claim our calling to multiply loaves and fishes until all are fed. We know the earth our home aches from abuse, and so this day we claim our calling to be stewards of the creation which you so trustingly place in our care. We know that there are shadows, shadows that sometimes make us want to tremble – shadows called Vietnam, Oklahoma City, Columbine. And yet joy comes in the morning, loving God, and so grant us the courage to proclaim, even with the faintest whisper, of resurrection and new life.

And in that triangle whose difficult angles are Miami and Havana and Washington, we pray for grown-ups, that they may have the spirit of discernment, and we pray for that little boy caught in the middle, and for little girls and little boys everywhere, whose day this is, whose very lives testify to the promise of resurrection, and whose neighborhoods must be filled with safe places to play, arms to embrace and friends to care for them.

We lift up those whose bodies and spirits ache this day, from the pain of disease, from addiction or loneliness or anxiety. This resurrection day is their day. We lift up those facing cancer, those facing HIV and AIDS, those facing depression. Help them to know, and all those who love them and care for them, that though they walk through the valley of darkness, that the light of the empty tomb is theirs now and forever.

We pray for the church, the church of Christ in every age. As it gathers in many places and forms this morning, eternal God, we pray for its unity, for its call to be caring and compassionate, for its call to serve those in need, for its call to move beyond differences into the fullness of this morning, that the news it proclaims might be good and hopeful, that the communities it builds might be open-hearted and vibrant, that the ministry it undertakes might reflect transformation, the transformation of a stone rolled away and the joy of this good day.

And so meet us on this good day, gracious God. In your living persuade us to rejoice. In your suffering, vindicate the love which saves. Call us by name and meet us with gentleness and resolution, that we might sing resurrection this day and every day, for he who was dead is not dead, but is risen, and our joy comes with the morning. And hear us now as with voices joined with the voices of the resurrection community gathered over time and space, in that great city, we share the prayer of the risen one taught to his friends, saying...